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Young people in Brussels: social inequality and cultural diversity

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Les jeunesses bruxelloises : inégalité sociale et diversité culturelle

Brusselse jongeren: sociale ongelijkheid en culturele diversiteit

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Translator: Jane Corrigan



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Synopsis nr. 9

Young people in Brussels: social inequality and cultural diversity

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9 february, 19.45

Erasmus Hogeschool
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The murder of Joe Van Holsbeeck prompted many categories of young people to be defined: those who do well at school and who militate in favour of good causes; the eternal suspects whom we heap opprobrium on without warning; and the invisible youth revealed by surveillance cameras. Generosity and threat are two characteristics ascribed to young people. This dramatic news item cannot be reduced to the violence of youth. One must question the persistent tendency to bring discredit on certain young people in Brussels, their increasingly precarious existence, and the growing adversity between young people of various social and ethnic origins. In the 1989 work *Réussir Bruxelles* edited by Charles Picqué, the chapter on youth mentioned the lack of importance attached to the young population. Twenty years later, this observation has not changed. Certain aspects of the situation have, in contrast, worsened. However, the Brussels-Capital Region has a large youth population which constitutes a source of opportunities rather than a handicap, although this viewpoint does not prevail. Young people are too often dealt with in the prism of social problems. Unfortunately, this contribution will not entirely escape this tendency.

I. Observations

1. *A young and diversified demography*

Whereas in 1970 Brussels represented the oldest population in the Kingdom, immigration has contributed to its rejuvenation, making the Region the youngest in Belgium. This is marked in particular by a high birth rate (14.8%) (Observatoire de l'enfance, 2007). The large number of young people is also seen in the upper age groups; the under 20 age group (248,915) represents 24.1% of the Brussels population and the under 25 age group (317,280) represents 30.7%. The presence of young people varies according to municipality and neighbourhood. It is especially marked in the poorest area of Brussels (Deboosere, Willaert, 2006). In 2007, there

were 46,337 children under the age of 3 in Brussels and 122,470 children aged 3 to 12 (Observatoire, 2008). Their proportion is highest in Molenbeek and Saint-Josse, and lowest in Ixelles and Woluwe-Saint-Lambert. The diversity of origins is also characteristic, as one out of five children aged 0 to 14 are of a foreign nationality. However, this figure underestimates the actual diversity of the inhabitants of Brussels because it is based only on nationality, whereas national and ethnic origin are determining factors in terms of identity which show the more mixed aspect of the young inhabitants of Brussels. Those of Moroccan and Turkish origin constitute a significant proportion of the young people in Brussels. Finally, the rejuvenation of Brussels is also due to the internationalisation of the city, as it attracts many Flemish and Walloon students who come to benefit from the wide range of educational options offered in Brussels for their higher education studies, in an open cultural context. The city also attracts young foreigners whom, after their studies, come to work for the European institutions and related organisations. This diversity is sometimes at the origin of negative mutual representations which transform cultural differences into adversity (Jacobs and Rea, 2007). Research activity based on the 'mind mapping' (Samarcande, 2008) of young people in Anderlecht (Cureghem), Etterbeek and Woluwé-Saint-Lambert demonstrates the mutual ignorance resulting from the separate social lives of young people who do not mix with each other. Territorial and mental boundaries have been established between these young people and are not crossed out of 'fear of being attacked' on behalf of the young people of Etterbeek and Woluwé, and out of fear of 'looking like a criminal' on behalf of the young people of Anderlecht. Mobility becomes an essential factor in the differentiation of social classes in the era of globalisation. Young people in Brussels from fortunate backgrounds benefit from this tendency towards mobility, often multipolar in and outside Brussels as well as abroad. Immobility is more a characteristic of young people from working-class backgrounds.

2. Education of young people

The situation in Brussels is special in terms of education: the educational offer is highly varied and competitive (French Community, Flemish Community, European schools, international schools and private schools). The data related to the French and Flemish education systems show that school results are generally not as good as in Flanders or Wallonia. These results are mostly due to wide gaps between results rather than an overall low average. The education of young people is a selective process whereby social inequalities translate into educational inequalities, which in turn reproduce the former. This long-standing observation remains relevant today, particularly in Brussels. Selection takes place on entry to and within the school. It is determined by socioeconomic level, educational level and ethnicity. School entry is a first selective step. Objective difficulties in terms of mobility (distance between residence and school) reduce the scope of possibilities. Commuting practices (cars, school bus services) (Halleux *et al.* 2007) neutralise the negative effects of distances. Selection at school entry is also due to the consistency sought by the school between its image and that of its public. In the Flemish education system, the search for a balance between Flemish, French and 'non-native' pupils proceeds from and results in selectivity (COC, 2008). Finally, an attachment to a neighbourhood based on pride or constraint may also limit mobility (Verhoeven, 2002; Verhoeven *et al.*, 2007). Selectivity in school is more common: repeating a year, restreaming or early school leaving. In the Flemish Community overall, the proportion of pu-

pils who have fallen behind at school is 2.6% compared to 4.6% in Brussels. For the French Community, this proportion reaches 4.1% compared to 4.0% in Brussels. In secondary education, the gaps widen to the detriment of Brussels: in the Flemish Community, the proportion reaches 5.8% compared to 8.4% in Brussels, and in the French Community, it reaches 12.7% compared to 16% in Brussels (Carlier, 2006). These data are stable over time. Having to repeat a year is not only an educational sanction: it is an instrument in the management of the heterogeneity of pupils, with a sorting function (Delvaux, 1999). General education and its pupils remain highly valued from a social point of view, whereas technical and vocational education is highly depreciated. In the 2nd and 3rd cycles of French secondary education, 64.2% of pupils are enrolled in general education, 19.5% in vocational education and 16.3% in technical and artistic. In the poorest area of Brussels, pupils in vocational, technical and artistic education are over-represented, whereas in the municipalities in the southeast of Brussels, pupils in general education are over-represented (Kesteloot, Slegers, 2006). Selectivity continues to exist as regards access to higher education. This includes mainly pupils who live in the southeast of Brussels and the outskirts to the west and north. This selectivity, which combines social, educational and ethnic determining factors, exists in both the Flemish (Lacante, M. *et al.*, 2007) and French (Arias Ortiz Dehon, 2008) education systems.

3. *Socioeconomic dualisation and urban segregation*

Especially, young people are affected by the consequences of socioeconomic dualisation and urban segregation. This is particular so for young inhabitants of Brussels from working classes, descendants of immigrants and with low revenues and low educational levels. In 2007, the employment rate of young inhabitants of Brussels aged 15-24 was lower than the Belgian employment rate. There is a particularly high level of unemployment among young people. In 2007, the unemployment rate in the Brussels Region reached 20.4% on average, whereas that of young people under the age of 25 reached 31.9% (Observatoire, 2008). As with the age structure, the distribution of pupils and the sense of social belonging of families, the municipalities in the poorest area of the city have higher unemployment rates for young people (from 21.3% in Woluwé-Saint-Pierre to 40.1% in Molenbeek). Consequently, it is not surprising to see that young people also represent a large proportion of social security beneficiaries: they represent 4.1% of the Brussels population, which is nearly three times higher than the percentage for Belgium (1.5%). Due to the large number of young people, the proportion of social security beneficiaries is also particularly high among the younger age groups: 8.6% of 18-19 year-olds and 7.2% of 20-24 year-olds (Observatoire, 2008). Research on the workforce indicates that the proportion of unqualified young people who are no longer enrolled in the education system or undertaking training is higher in Brussels than in the rest of the country. More than one out of four young inhabitants of Brussels are early school leavers (especially boys). A large number (48.7%) of unemployed young people aged 18 to 24 have no more than a lower secondary school diploma. The proportion of these poorly qualified young people in Brussels is 28.0% compared to 15.8% in Belgium; this mainly concerns Belgians who are descendants of immigrants. In the Brussels Region, the exclusion from the labour market related to a low level of education is much more evident than in the country as a whole, with the gaps being twice as wide (Kesteloot, Slegers, 2006).

4. *Precarious youth, dangerous youth*

The association between 'young people' and 'criminality' is very widespread in Brussels, and even more so between 'ethnic minority' and 'delinquency'. For some, the ethnic factor is an artefact that depends on the socioeconomic factor (Vercaigne *et al.*, 2000), whereas for others (van San and Leerkes, 2001) it plays a dominant independent role. Selfreport studies (Vercaigne *et al.*, 2000) show that differences based on ethnicity are not very significant. The most discriminating factor is gender: boys claim to commit many more crimes than girls. Walgrave's theory of societal vulnerability emphasises factors such as disciplinary problems at school, truancy and parents' lack of control. However, the question of delinquency is also related to visibility and punishment for crimes. It is therefore a question of the criminalisation of young people. Young people who 'inhabit' the streets are more visible, and certain events are reported more than others. This selectivity contributes to the criminalisation of certain young people. Many criminological studies testify to the development of delinquency among young people – especially those from immigrant families – by police and legal activity. Brion (2007) has made a summary of all the studies which attempt to show that delinquency among young people from immigrant families is reported more frequently (charges made) due to the fact that they are targeted more by the police, which means that there is legal action more often, preventive detention is applied more often, the accelerated procedure is used more often, prison sentences are more common than alternative measures, and punishments are followed through with more often. Christiaens (1999, p. 13) underlines that in terms of the protection of young people, 'paradoxically, it is the social and penal reaction which describes and redefines young delinquents as a specific problem. The young delinquent is the end result and not the starting point of a process.' This institutional construction of juvenile delinquency in turn contributes to reinforcing the threatening image conveyed by politicians and the media, in particular when speaking about violence among young people (Nagels, 2005).

II. Questions-issues

1. *Educational apartheid in Brussels?*

For a very long time, studies on education have highlighted the essential role of socioeconomic factors as regards educational success rates, as well as the level of education of parents. This has been verified in several recent works (Delvaux 1999; Hirtt, 2004; Jacobs *et al.*, 2007; Jacobs and Rea, 2007; Verhoeven *et al.*, 2007). In Brussels, social and ethnic differences are superposed. The majority of pupils whose parents correspond to the first two indicators of social origin (*Economic, Social and Cultural Status*), i.e. the lowest, are over-represented in technical and vocational education (Verhoeven *et al.* 2007). Several recent works mention the structural role played by institutional factors which may be influenced more directly by the public authorities. These institutional factors are related to the existence of a quasi-market, which is very pronounced in Brussels. The quasi-market accounts for the differences in performances between pupils in the same education system. The hierarchical organisation of schools is established in the French Community (Delvaux, 1999; Draelants, Dupriez and Maroy, 2003; Dupriez and Vandenberghe, 2004; Maroy, 2007), and competition is stimulated by legal provisions, school strategies and parents. The freedom in the choice of school contributes to the segregation of the education market. The logic of economic competition in the education sector should prompt competitors to increase the recognition they earn. Maroy (2006) has observed the opposite: schools adhere to a logic of complementary differentiation. Thus, certain schools are known for receiving pupils and others for turning them away. The 'open' schools receive young people who have exhausted all enrolment possibilities (after restreaming, repeating a year or expulsion). The 'closed' schools preserve the pupils who meet the criteria of educational excellence. This complementary differentiation establishes a two-tier education system. The hierarchy of schools is built on 'reputations' and social representations conveyed by social networks (Maroy, 2006). This subjective logic contributes to the creation of asymmetries: separation of target groups, educational segregation, lack of heterogeneity in schools and classes and maintenance of separate pathways (Delvaux and Joseph, 2006). The competition of this quasi-market produces an educational apartheid, due to the fact that the dualisation is both social and ethnic in Brussels.

2. *Socioeconomic dualisation and ethnic discrimination?*

The Brussels labour market is very competitive and puts young people in Brussels at a disadvantage. The characteristics of unemployed young people are often presented as the causes of the problem: lack of education and training, low level of linguistic skills and lack of motivation. This interpretation, referred to as the 'theory of deficit' (Neels and Stoop, 2000), remains important in the media and political arenas. Differences subsist between the inhabitants of the poorest area and those in the rest of the Brussels Region. For example, 17% of the working population with university degrees who live in the poorest area of the city are unemployed. This is the case for only 8% of the population in the rest of the Region with the same qualifications (Wayens *et al.* 2006). Vandermotten (2008, p. 23) confirms the inequality of access to employment for people with the same qualifications according to neighbourhood. 'In the poorest area of the city, having no more than a lower secondary diploma leads to an unemployment rate above 40%, whereas for the inhabitants of

Watermael-Boitsfort in the same situation, the unemployment rate is lower than 20% or even 10%.' These figures point to another explanation: the existence of discrimination when it comes to hiring. Through the use of data from the Banque Carrefour, several studies have established the ethnic stratification of the labour market (Verhoeven, Martens, 2000). Okkerse and Termotte (2004) have even shown that the position of Belgians of foreign origin is less favourable than that of foreigners. Foreigners and descendants of immigrants are over-represented in the hotel, restaurant, commerce and industrial cleaning sectors, and are under-represented in the quaternary sector (public employment, education, health and culture institutions). Studies (Ouali and Rea 1995; Martens and Ouali, 2005) have also shown the greater difficulties for young people of Moroccan origin to access initial employment and then to maintain a job. Direct discrimination was highlighted especially in the BIT research (Arrijn, Feld and Nayer, 1997) which, via the use of the testing method, established the very act of discrimination. The testing revealed the reality of discrimination when it comes to hiring, reaching 34.1% in Brussels. The results of this research met with an extensive response among the media, social partners and public authorities (Adam, 2007) without leading to a voluntarist public policy to fight for the cause. The feeling of collective discrimination is very present among young people of Moroccan origin (Rea, 2001) and young women who wear headscarves (Manço and Brion, 1999; Ben Mohammed, 2004). The study by Martens and Ouali (2005) on ethnic discrimination in the Brussels labour market confirms the existence of direct and indirect ethnic and racial discrimination experienced by young Belgians from immigrant families.

3. *A social security interpretation of precariousness and inequality?*

The prevailing views of politicians (Nagels, 2005) and the media are centred more on violence committed by young people than on violence against young people. In terms of juvenile delinquency, a profusion of public policies situated between prevention and repression have been established. Specific protective measures have been taken, such as the increase in IPPJ capacity, the establishment of alternative measures (penal mediation, community service), the creation of a database on city gangs, the autonomous police management of urban delinquency, the accelerated procedure and the creation of prisons for young people. Associations are encouraged between educational and youth assistance stakeholders and penal administration institutions (police and justice). Instruments in the fight against juvenile delinquency underlie the reinforcement of penal logic (De Fraene *et al.*, 2005). New security and regulation policies have also been adopted. They promote a security and social orientation (Schaut, 2001; Nagels and Rea, 2007). Among the urban security policies (security contracts and administrative sanctions), the objective of the activities undertaken by police and new security stakeholders (teachers, mediators, etc.) is urban pacification. Through an increase in security, precariousness is put under surveillance. Security orientation leads to a transformation in the meaning of cultural, social and sports activities proposed as measures in the forward-looking management of delinquency risks. Administrative sanctions may also be applied to minors from age 16. This measure makes a breach in the penal responsibility of minors. The security dimension appears in the insistence on punishment and atonement. As underlined by De Vos (2005, p. 22), 'once again, young people are called to be responsible, whereas in everyday life, the means for being responsible arrive later and later'. At the same time, local social policies (big city policies, fund for the promotion

of immigration policy, urban regeneration agreements, social cohesion, etc.) are proposed to encourage social regulation. The social content of these public policies is based on two principles: compensation and occupation (Rea, 2007). This involves compensating for the 'handicaps' of certain young people or for their lack of access to resources (remedial classes, initial and vocational training, etc.), or occupying young people through sociocultural and sports activities. Public policies offer opportunities which families cannot provide to certain young people (cinema, theatre, video, information technology, museums, football, basketball, judo, etc.). They are also aimed at preventing the effects of idleness and at getting young people off the streets. They also provide new resources which the beneficiaries would not have access to otherwise.

III. Policy options

General philosophy: to promote regulation policies beforehand (school, employment, housing) aimed at combating social injustice, rather than promoting reparation policies afterwards.

1. *Instruments for the evaluation of public policies*

- a. The evaluation of public policies implies that pertinent analysis tools have been made available. The creation and use of statistics of economic, social, national, etc. origin proves necessary in the area of education and employment.
- b. Transparency regarding educational data, including success and performance rates for each school, CEB exam success rates, etc.
- c. An objective evaluation must be made of the actual effects of local policies (integration, security, prevention, etc.) with respect to the pursued goals.

2. *Make the labour market more equal*

- a. Implement positive action measures at the level of vocational integration and combat indirect ethnic discrimination.
- b. Implement monitoring of the vocational integration of young people.

3. *Stop identifying young people in Brussels as a threat*

- a. Promote the cultural diversity of young people in Brussels.
- b. Promote activities to mix the various populations and the cultural resources produced by young people.
- c. Produce a regional project for the mobilisation of young people centred on different cultures.
- d. Put an end to the focus on security and concentrate on participation and citizenship.

4. *Go beyond institutional cleavage*

- a. Create educational basins to regulate enrolment in schools.
- b. Promote a more integrated regional policy at the level of cultural and youth associations and organisations with, at the very least, cooperation agreements between VGC, Cocof and the French Community.

5. *Promote the political and symbolic position of young people in Brussels*

- a. Brussels is an open city: its international dimension involves the promotion of the cultural diversity of its youth.
- b. Brussels is an educational crossroad, which attracts a variety of young people, and its identity as a place for university and other higher education studies should be promoted.
- c. The democratic vigour in Brussels will depend on the capacity to organise forums and actions on behalf of citizens: young people are the main stakeholders, but this implies that they should be given a part to play (Regional Youth Council in the Parliament).

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